



PENINSULA FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB INC.

Mornington Peninsula, Victoria, Australia

NEWSLETTER: MARCH 2017

Banyan and Edithvale Wetlands 6th February 2017

Despite the fine (mostly) mild weather our numbers were reduced to three at the Banyan Waterhole, watched by a small herd of curious cows.

White-necked Herons and Royal Spoonbills were in abundance on this morning, with six of the former and about ten of the latter inhabiting the waterhole and surrounds; one Heron seemed to prefer the middle of the road, while another was found in a small waterhole down the side road. White-faced Herons were present in smaller numbers. White and Straw-necked Ibis, and a single Yellow-billed Spoonbill, mingled with abundant Chestnut Teal and Pacific Black Ducks. A lone Cattle Egret, resplendent in breeding plumage, visited briefly. While a Swamp Harrier swept by overhead, a Black-shouldered Kite kept watch from a dead pine tree.



White-necked Herons at Banyan. Photo – Lee Denis

Bush birds were relatively few, and included Fairy-wren, Goldfinch and a couple of honeyeaters. Red-rumped Parrots, often seen here, were not in evidence today. The species total came to 34.



Juvenile Night Heron at Edithvale. Photo – Lee Denis

We then travelled to Edithvale Wetland for lunch on the viewing platform, where we added a few new birds for the day in the 24 species sighted. Highlights here included the pair of Magpie-geese, three juvenile Nankeen Night Herons, and a Pink-eared Duck, mingling with the Black-winged Stilts, Grey and Chestnut Teal, Pacific Black Ducks, Coots, Swampheens and Moorhens. A single Red-kneed Dotterel was spotted, and Clamorous Reed-warblers popped into view at intervals.

Other birders who arrived at intervals spoke of different Crane species, but none appeared. – **Lee Denis**.

Bird List For Banyan Waterhole 6 Feb 2017

Black Swan	Australian Pelican	Yellow-billed Spoonbill	Crested Pigeon	Australian Magpie
Australian Shelduck	White-faced Heron	Black-shouldered Kite	Superb Fairy-wren	Little Raven
Pacific Black Duck	White-necked Heron	Swamp Harrier	Red Wattlebird	European Goldfinch
Chestnut Teal	Cattle Egret	Eurasian Coot	Noisy Miner	Welcome Swallow
Hoary-headed Grebe	Australian White Ibis	Masked Lapwing	White-plumed Honeyeater	Common Starling
Little Pied Cormorant	Straw-necked Ibis	Silver Gull	Magpie-Lark	Common Myna
Little Black Cormorant	Royal Spoonbill	Spotted Turtle-Dove	Willie Wagtail	

Bass Strait and Islands

Bill Robinson

8th February

Bill is a retired veterinarian and committed kayaker, who regularly participates in the Murray River Marathon and other kayak events. Ten years ago he was part of a 6 man team who trained for a year before attempting a Bass Strait crossing by kayak. This crossing is considered the Mt Everest of kayaking, and many have failed the attempt and required rescuing.

They had to take a 2 week supply of food, and study the tides and weather predictions to make a successful crossing. Their average speed was 8 km per hour.

Bill had a topographic map of Bass Strait, showing how shallow the Strait is – 30 to 50 metres deep on average, being a land bridge between the mainland and Tasmania until sea levels rose 10,000 years ago. Aboriginals were able to walk to Tasmania until then. The surrounding oceans are 4000 metres deep, and this difference funnels water movement through the Strait, creating dangerous conditions for ships. In the early days of white settlement numerous ships wrecked in Bass Strait. During the Second World War German mines sank several merchant ships also.

They started at Port Welshpool, and their first leg took them to Hogan Island near Wilsons Promontory, which has a Little Penguin colony. The next leg was to the Kent Group – Deal, Erith, Dover and 3 other islands make up the group. Deal Island had a lighthouse built early to protect shipping, and since de-commissioned. The explorer Hovell was wrecked there, and had to be rescued. There are no snakes on Deal Island, but other fauna such as possums, bandicoots and wallabies, which drink seawater and eat seaweed. Stephen Murray-Smith, a Mt Eliza resident, had a holiday

home on Erith Island, considered himself the protector of Bass Strait, and edited the definitive book *Bass Strait: Australia's Last Frontier*.

From the Kent Group it was a 13½ hour paddle to Flinders Island, part of the Furneaux Group. The Bass Strait islands have a long and tragic Aboriginal history. Sealers captured mainland Aboriginal women and took them to Flinders Island for their sealers camp there from 1800 until the seals were wiped out. Later on, after the Tasmanian War on aboriginals, survivors of that were exiled to Flinders and Cape Barren Islands, until the few survivors of these settlements were eventually allowed back to Tasmania.

Flinders Island has mutton birds (shearwaters) nesting, and tiger snakes who live on the chicks during nesting time. Chapple Island is famous for its large tiger snakes. Preservation Island in the Furneaux Group was named for a shipwreck event on the island ten years after Sydney was founded. A party set off in a long boat to get help in Sydney, only to wreck on the Ninety Mile beach in Gippsland. From there they walked to Sydney, only a few surviving this journey. One of the rescue ships also wrecked in Bass Strait, but the sailors and cargo were eventually rescued.

The last leg of the journey to Tasmania was 25 km and perilous, due to the strong currents. They had to time their journey 2 hours before the change of tide so that they could zig-zag with the tides rather than against them. The whole journey was very adventurous, and we could see the magnificent scenery as well as the watery hazards. – **Judy Smart**

Eastern Treatment Plant, Bangholme

26th February

Every few years we join the monthly bird count at the ETP, led every month by distinguished birder Mike Carter. This year four of our members plus new recruit Josh and regular counters Dawn, Andrew and David helped with the count.

The ETP is an industrial site, not at all attractive (unlike the Western Treatment Plant at Werribee), but it always has great numbers of birds, waders in season, and the opportunity to see birds not easily seen elsewhere.

Over Spring and early Summer this year waterbirds were unusually low in numbers – they were all up in more northern climes after good rainfall there. They have been returning over the last few months and we counted 6400 Eurasian Coots for example, up from 1800 in January and only 7 in November. Ducks and grebes have returned too – we saw 510 Hoary-headed Grebes, 320 Pink-eared Ducks, and hundreds each of Grey Teal, Chestnut Teal and Pacific Black Duck, 75 Hardheads and 145 Blue-billed Duck.



Latham's Snipe. Photo - Andrew McCutcheon

Waders have been scarce but this month we counted 31 Sharp-tailed Sandpiper.

Highlights were great views of two White-bellied Sea-

Eagles and two Wedge-tailed Eagles, and a Yellow-billed Spoonbill nest with three large young sitting up.



White-bellied Sea-Eagle. Photo - Andrew McCutcheon

We admired Mike and his team's dedication to the task – it is a full day's work counting at the ETP, every month, and another day per month counting at the external areas of the

ETP – Boundary Rd (we visited this area separately in Feb), the Turf Farm, Boggy Creek and the Serpentine. Mike and our late and much missed member Peggy Mitchell started the count when the Treatment Plant was built in 1975, and Mike is still going strong 42 years later!

The results of each month's count are sent to Birdlife and Melbourne Water, and form an important record. In a summary of the counts from 1998 to 2011, 182 bird species were recorded, quite a number for an area of 6 sq. km. The number has since risen to 193. – **Judy Smart.**



Spoonbill with nest. Photo - Andrew McCutcheon

Balnarring: Balbirooroo Wetlands Birding 6th March

On a perfect early autumn day, our small group visited Balbirooroo Wetlands, one of the Peninsula's eastern side birding spots. As soon as we started our walk through Ian Wiskon Woodland we noticed how Balbirooroo Wetlands are abundant with birds to see and hear.

In the Wetland we spotted hundreds of Anseriformes including: Black Swan, Australian Shelduck, Hardhead, Pacific Black Duck, Chesnut Teal and Australian Wood Duck.



Photo – Velimir Dragic

Numberless small Passeriformes were playing and singing everywhere around us (Little Wattlebird, New Holland and Yellow-faced Honeyeaters, Brown and Striated Thornbill, Dusky Wood Swallow, Grey Fantail, Red-browed Finch, Fairy Martin etc).



Photo – Velimir Dragic

Also, in the water we spotted both Australian Grebe and Hoary-headed Grebe. In the water and on the grassy banks around there were some of Gruiformes: Purple Swampphen, Dusky Moorhen, Common Coot, and Pelicaniformes: White Faced Heron, Australian White and Straw necked Ibis, Little Pied and Little Black Cormorant etc. Sulphur crested Cockatoo was the only one of Psittaciformes that we saw.

We were not lucky to see any of the Accipitriformes or Coraciiformes.

It was a short, but beautiful and enjoyable birding morning, which, after lunch, we finished by “inspecting” Yvonne’s new travellers van. – **Velimir Dragic**

Bird List for Balbirooroo Wetlands, Balnarring 6th March 2017			
Anseriformes	Cuculiformes	Charadriiformes	Grey Shrike-thrush
Black Swan	Shining Bronze-cuckoo	Masked Lapwing	Australian Magpie
Australian Shelduck	Fan-tailed Cuckoo	Psittaciformes	Dusky Woodswallow
Hardhead	Gruiformes	Sulphur-crested Cockatoo	Willie Wagtail
Pacific Black Duck	Purple Swamphen	Passeriformes	Grey Fantail
Chesnut Teal	Dusky Moorhen	Superb Fairy Wren	Little Raven
Australian Wood Duck	Common (Eurasian) Coot	Yellow-faced Honeyeater	Magpie-lark
Phoenicopteriformes	Pelicaniformes	Noisy Miner	Red-browed Finch
Australian Grebe	White Faced Heron	Little Wattlebird	European Goldfinch
Hoary-headed Grebe	Australian White Ibis	Red Wattlebird	Fairy Martin
Columbiformes	Straw Necked Ibis	New Holland Honeyeater	Welcome Swallow
Spotted Turtle-dove	Little Pied Cormorant	Spotted Pardelote	Common Myna
	Little Black Cormorant	White-browed Scrubwren	Blackbird
		Striated Thornbill	
		Brown thornbill	

Iguazu to Atacama – World’s Largest Waterfall and Driest Desert

**Heather Ducat,
8th March**

Heather has spoken to us before about her journeys to South America, and this time she showed us a 2000km journey east – west across the middle of South America from the extremes of the world’s largest waterfall on the eastern side, to the west coast Atacama Desert.



Iguazu Falls. Photo – Heather Ducat

The prevailing easterly winds make the east coast of South America the highest rainfall side, and their journey started in rainforest. The Iguazu waterfall on the Parana River is at the junction of Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina. The

waterfall is 2.7km wide, has 200 separate cascades 84m high (cf Niagara Falls at 51m high, and Victoria Falls in Africa which is 1.6km wide) and is the largest in the world by volume of water. The sheer size and scope of this waterfall made photographing it difficult, but it is truly spectacular.



Vicuna in the High Andes. Photo – Heather Ducat

The plants and fauna were remarkable too – 60 orchids, bromeliads, jaguar, ocelot, anteaters, capuchin monkeys, among others. The 400 species of birds included many

hummingbirds, from 8 to 12 cm in size, plus toucans, woodpeckers and macaws, to name a few.

Travelling west the landscape became progressively drier – after the rainforest the next landscape type was savannah, with the fertile windblown soil of the flat pampas. Here there were floating islands, with pied black and white swans, marsh deer, crab eating foxes and a bird called the black necked screamer. This name was no exaggeration, and farmers sometimes domesticate them to guard poultry. The world's largest rodent (at 60-70kg), the capybara lives here. With no trees to perch on, birds have adapted – the burrowing owl nests in rodent burrows.

The next landscape was the thorny steppe, the home of the cactus, acacias and peppercorn trees (*Schinus*), well known to Australians. One resident is the rufous oven-bird, which builds an oven shaped mud nest on top of stumps. Another is the armadillo, which lives much like an echidna, burrowing into the ground when disturbed. Heather explained the llama family too – there are 4 types, 2 wild and 2 domesticated. The wild are the guanaco, which live between sea level and 4000m, and the vicuna, famous for its fine hair, which lives above 4000m and is legally protected. The domesticated are the llama, which are pack animals, and the alpaca, which are kept for wool and meat only.

From here they climbed 4200m to the Andes, a very active geological area with frequent volcanoes and earthquakes, and gold, silver and lead mines. The Andes is the longest

mountain range in the world, 8000km in length, with the world's highest mountain outside the Himalayas – Aconcagua.



Atacama Desert. Photo – Heather Ducat

The Andes creates a very effective rain shadow west, and then between the coast range and the Andes, in a double rain shadow is the Atacama, the driest desert in the world, 1000km long, and which officially has had no rain at all for 400 years. The soil has no microbial life at all - even in a laboratory it is unable to grow plants. It is a cold desert too, and freezing at night. Even in these harsh conditions there is some wildlife – flamingos in the salt lakes, and some of the numerous rodents of South America- vischava, and chinchillas, hunted almost to extinction for their wool. – Judy Smart.

Sale SEANA Camp March 2017

Heather, Coralie and I went to the Sale SEANA Camp, jointly hosted by Latrobe Valley and Sale & District Field Naturalists Clubs, and attended by 120 field naturalists from all over Victoria. There was a smorgasbord of excursions on offer. I chose the two foothills tours, with emphasis on the two major local rivers.

The first day was a walk up Mt Hedrick, with panoramic views over the Alps. There were a few flowers out, and you could see that the Spring wildflower show would be spectacular. We drove down to the Avon River Channel, a prosaic name for a beautiful rocky gorge. One of the interesting plants there was the tree Hakea, *H. eriantha*. We were glad to paddle there after our energetic climb up Mt Hedrick.

The second day was to the Mitchell River National Park, which was declared a Heritage river in 1992, and is both un-dammed and unregulated. We walked down a steep track through firstly dry forest, with big Kurrajongs (*Brachychiton populneus*) and Lightwood wattles (*Acacia implexa*), then into the rainforest gully with Lillypillies (*Acmena smithi*), *Pittosporum undulatum*, and Kanooka gum (*Tristaniaopsis laurina*) plus a profusion of ferns. We

walked to the Den of Nargun – a rock cave behind a waterhole, significant to the Gunai/Kurnai people. We saw a young male lyrebird scratching around nearby.



Mitchell River. Photo – Judy Smart

From here we walked down Woolshed Creek to the Mitchell River, a beautiful river gorge, with a few reptiles

along the way – a red-bellied black snake, a jacky lizard, and water skinks. The vegetation was very interesting, with many Gippsland endemics, but unfortunately I have lost my notes and forgotten everything.

The Camp was beautifully organised, with great excursions, speakers, catering and company – **Judy Smart**.

One of the excursions was to the Port of Sale, aboard the 1912 former steamer 'Rubeena'. The afternoon cruise was an interesting mix of natural & historic features.

The Port of Sale is connected to the Thomson River by a 2.5km. man-made canal, which was completed in 1890. From the junction with the canal, the Thomson flows into the La Trobe River & on into Lake Wellington, the largest of the Gippsland lakes. Sale's prosperity grew because of its strategic location between Port Albert & the goldfields near Dargo & Omeo.



Photo – Heather Ducat

South of Sale, at the confluence of the Thomson & La Trobe Rivers is the spectacular nineteenth century Swing Bridge, which until 2005 was the route of the South Gippsland Highway. The bridge was built between 1880 - 1883 & is the oldest surviving, intact, Swing Bridge in

Australia. This historic bridge was designed to pivot from the centre & is manually operated through a series of cogs & gears. When open the swing-span lies parallel with the river. It allowed schooners, steamers & barges access to the Port of Sale, which operated until 1936. The bridge is 61m. long, with a central swing-span of 46m. & is opened on Saturday & Sunday afternoons. Gliding quietly along, we saw billabongs of the Thomson, stately River Red Gums with canoe scars & the highlight, a beautiful Azure Kingfisher, on the historic bridge!!

Other excursions I attended had a focus on birds, with Sale Common Wetland being one of the best in the area. It is a varied habitat of Red Gum Woodland, grassland & freshwater marsh on the floodplain of the Thomson River. Known as 'Floodplain Riparian Woodland', it is characterized by large River Red Gums (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) & Forest Red Gums (*Eucalyptus tereticornis*). These closely-related species are known to hybridise.

The 450m. long boardwalk provided easy access & good viewing of the waterbirds, 2 Whistling Kites & a Sea Eagle. Birds in the woodland fringe included Rufous & Golden Whistlers, White-Throated Treecreeper, Brown, Striated & Yellow Thornbills & Red-Browed Finch. My birdlist for the weekend was 63, but I'm sure the expert birdos saw more. – **Heather Ducat**.



Photo – Heather Ducat

Flies Galore

The wide range of colours and form of the 30 or more different flies photographed in my garden, have been a revelation to me. Medium to large hairy flies from the families Muscidae (house flies); Calliphoridae (blow flies) and Sarcophagidae (flesh flies) were expected but the others are quite different.

Why the crane fly (*Leptotarsus costalis*) evolved to such a creature is a puzzle. They have a solid body with amazingly long, skinny legs that seem to be incapable of holding up the body and have always been hanging in vegetation. They

have a wobbly flight pattern, probably due to the wind drag on those long legs. Shrunken rear wings, called halteres, are very prominent and would be used quite a bit in their role as stabilisers during flight. Males have huge antennae (over 50mm long), whereas the females have very short antennae of a couple of millimetres (this sexual difference is common with many insects).

Predatory long-legged flies (family Dolichopodidae) are brightly coloured, iridescent flies. They are very small and move rapidly among the foliage. All the robber flies

(Asilidae), the other predators, have just been sitting on a perch waiting for suitable prey to come along where they make great photography subjects as they at least sit very still!



Crane Fly. Photo – Rog Standen

Hover flies (family Syrphidae) abound when the weather is warm and were the most numerous fly species seen. The Common Hover Fly (*Melangyna viridiceps*) was ever-present, but a smaller hover fly *Sphaerophoria macrogaster*, with more yellow on the thorax and head was far less common.

Small fruit flies come in many colours, some more hairy than others and eye colour can be as varied as well from a bright purple to the basic red and through to multi-coloured. Examples I have identified include species from the family Tephritidae (true fruit flies), in the genera *Sphenella* and *Austrotophritis* and probable species from the family Drosophilidae (also called fruit flies). All have a

characteristic narrow body and wings folding over the top of the abdomen. An exception was a species from Tephritidae with bulbous red eyes that held its wings perpendicular to its body.



Harlequin Flies. Photo – Rog Standen

A first encounter with the Harlequin Fly (*Bibio hortulanus*), leads to the incorrect conclusion that the two sexes look like different species. The male is shorter, all black and with large bulbous eyes. The female has an orange thorax and abdomen, black wings and a completely different head that is narrow and elongated with small eyes. Mating shows they are from the same species.

When watching flies, it becomes clear that many species, if not all, exhibit the practice of blowing droplets of moisture from their mouthparts, holding it for a period and then sucking it back in. Referred to as bubbling, it seems the most likely reason for this and the only one I could find that had experimental backup, was that it concentrates the nutrients within the droplet. – **Rog Standen**

Peninsula Field Naturalists Club Inc

Meetings are held on the second Wednesday of each month with a field trip the following Saturday. Further information and current Programme of Activities can be found at our website.

President:
Coralie Davies

All correspondence to
Secretary
Judy Smart

Annual Subs due July

Adult	\$25
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Newsletter edited by Lee Denis

www.peninsulafieldnaturalists.org.au

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